A Life Archived

by

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A Life Archived
for my grandma & me
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Grandma Caroline is ninety years old and she lives alone in an apartment in Washington, DC. She’s been shrinking ever since I’ve known her, but she ventures out more days than not with her collapsible cane and travels by bus, metro, and foot to the grocery store, the doctor’s office, the pharmacy, maybe a museum or two, and to church on Sundays. This year she took the bus to a Christmas tree lot and dragged her miniature evergreen back on the bus with her; when the weather’s nice, she’ll walk with a cart to a nearby farmers’ stand to buy a single melon (too heavy for her, if not for the wheels of the cart). She’s small – maybe 4 foot 7 – and almost completely deaf without her hearing aids, though those don’t seem to help much and, anyway, she can usually only find one at a time. She has chronic back and joint pain, arthritis and carpal tunnel in her hands, and is currently fighting inevitable macular degeneration with medication. Those who know her well like to call her “a trooper”; she smiles at the name.

My dad, her only son, got a job in San Diego and moved her grandchildren nearly 3,000 miles away. Sometimes Grandma Caroline came for Grandparents’ Day at school or for important graduations, but mostly I knew her by phone and by mail. She always sent something for my birthday and for Christmas and I always wrote her a thank you note while my dad stood over me, pre-addressed envelope in hand. If I
failed to send a prompt handwritten note, my dad would hear about it over the phone and we would hear my dad yell into the receiver and see him hold the phone at arm’s length, roll his eyes, and mutter, *my God!* Grandma Caroline could be “difficult,” my brother and I learned. Our mother affectionately called her “the ol’ battle-axe.”

Grandma Caroline’s apartment is kept very tidy. She bends over (making a funny little right angle) to pick up a bit of lint, a paperclip, a rubberband, or some other glaring annoyance. A massive gold-framed mirror hangs above her cream leather sofa, the apartment’s center, where she reads, naps, looks over her mail, watches television, has a drink before bed. Around the room, tables and shelves display travel souvenirs, pottery, African jewelry, and small figurines; her library takes up two walls, floor to ceiling.

Her apartment is small, but still plenty of room for one little old lady. There is a wide entryway, the kitchen and pantry to the left; a dining room with a small table, sofa, dressers; a living room/library, with two more sofas, two chairs, a desk, and her television; a balcony/garden – more chairs, a table, her plants; her bedroom/office; multiple closets; and two bathrooms.

But hidden out of view, hidden in closets and cupboards, in boxes and behind winter coats, hidden so well that a casual visitor would have no idea, are her archives. She keeps files on notable family members, on her grandchildren, on her ex-daughter-in-law, and on her son; on anyone she knows – her doctor, her church friend, her church friend’s nephew – who has been published or written about in a newspaper or magazine, who can be easily clipped out, put away, and saved for future reference.
And she keeps files on herself: pages and pages of things saved from her own life: letters, snapshots, business cards; newspaper articles, business memorandums, obituaries; copies of speeches, programs, and thank you cards. She has a file on the places she’s been employed, including letters of recommendation and a series of versions of her resume.

My grandfather was sick all of my childhood, but I still don’t know what killed him. He was a diabetic and an alcoholic and I was told that he had a disease that made everything fail at once, that he was in bed in the hospital waiting for the end. My dad flew to Washington, DC to be with him; my mom, my brother and I followed after he died.

We stayed in my grandparents’ three-story red brick house on Massachusetts Avenue. I remember my dad crying in the dining room in the middle of the night and I remember giving him a picture I drew of angels carrying Grandpa to heaven. I thought that would cheer him up, though we never talked about God or angels or heaven in my family. I remember the dark inside of the church where the service was held; I remember an American flag. I also remember the dress I wore: it came with a straw hat and a removable safety-pin bow. I never wore things like that, dresses with matching accessories, and Grandpa’s funeral was the only time I ever wore that dress.

After Grandpa died, Grandma Caroline moved into the apartment building where she still lives, and my dad saved a lot of things from his childhood home for himself: his father’s books and records, sculptures, paintings, prints, and furniture. Those things became our things, and we took them back to San Diego and filled our
house with them. My grandmother kept her things: the good silver, art books, prints and statues, old maps, her parents’ furniture.

I visited Grandma Caroline while I was in college – she took the sofa, and I took her bed because she really insisted – and I mentioned to my dad over the phone that she had pulled out a box of photographs and started telling me about the people in them. They were people I didn’t know, had never even heard mentioned: my grandmother’s aunts and uncles and cousins and friends, often posed in a garden, some of them sitting and some of them standing, big hats and long dresses on all the ladies.

She flipped through the pictures with a sense of urgency. She was telling me like I would remember. She was passing family history down to me – through me – and I was forgetting it almost as it was said. These people were very distant relatives. I felt no connection to them, didn’t really want to remember who they all were. I felt guilty about those feelings. This was clearly important to my grandmother, it was To Be Remembered, and she had no one else to tell. My dad told me to ask her about a book of photographs from New Mexico. He told me I’d like those.

I knew that my grandmother had been to New Mexico because my mom sometimes wore her old jean jacket, which I knew was hip and vintage and “valuable.” I didn’t know what she might have done there, not until I saw the photographs. Somehow, no one had told me that – right after college and in the midst of World War Two – my grandmother had lived on a ranch in New Mexico, had gone
riding with cowboys, wore pants and boots and a big hat. Why wasn’t *that* To Be Remembered? I asked Grandma about New Mexico and she dug up the photos. All I remember her telling me was that Georgia O’Keefe had also been in New Mexico in the early 1940s. I asked if she had met her. Oh, no, she told me, no one ever saw her. She was off alone in the desert. But so was Grandma.
My grandmother was born December 19, 1920 in Grand Rapids. She was a very shy girl. Her brothers, Serrell, older, and Doug, younger, teased her endlessly. Hermione, her sister, was the youngest; she was always shushed by the nurse or the cook and put away. Caroline read to her, looked after her. She looked up to Serrell; she played with Doug. Their parents went out often – to dinners, teas, lunches, fundraisers – and the children grew up in weird world, at once oddly Victorian – stifling, cold, governed by Rules – but also loving and gentle. Mother and Daddy loved them all very much. They were liberal, generous, churchgoing people. They always ate dinner as a family; they were close.

When Caroline was 9, her father Lemuel was hit by a car and killed, leaving her mother, Dorothy, and the four children to fend for themselves on the eve of the Great Depression. The car hit him right in front of their house on Fulton Street. He and Dorothy had been walking to dinner at a friend’s house. He had seen headlights, and had pushed his wife hard. They had both rolled into a ditch running along the side of the road. They were taken to the hospital together. She stayed with him until he died, then went home to the children.

Caroline’s mother’s grief was massive. It filled the house, and Caroline felt it push up against her. She remembers feeling sad for her mother, remembers trying to
fix up the house to see if she’d feel better. Caroline wanted help her mother, unburden her, so she might have her for herself. The house felt sad and empty.

After Lemuel’s death, Dorothy took typing and shorthand classes to keep her mind off her grief – “None of her friends typed,” my grandmother tells me, saying “typed” like it’s a bad word – and she eventually landed a job as head of the local Red Cross chapter. Dorothy enjoyed her work. It helped her cope with the loss of her husband, kept her out of the house and involved in the community. And she earned $25 a week.

I never heard much about my great-grandmother growing up but Grandma Caroline has shown me her Salvatore Ferragamo black silk dress hanging in the closet and I saw her engagement ring in a box, a tiny gold band with a big diamond.

Everyone called Caroline ‘Goldilocks’ when she was small. The photographs show her in white lacey pinafores, curly blond ringlets surrounding her face and, often, with a tiny blurry smile on her face. She was cute, like a little doll. But she will tell you that she was fat, round, plump, and pudgy. She will tell you that she didn’t have any friends, that she certainly never went on any dates, and that she was horribly shy and easily embarrassed. In 1933, Caroline wrote on the inside back cover of her diary that she was 12 years old, 4 feet 11 inches tall, and weighed 115 pounds. She also provided the measurements for her waist, bust, hip, ankle, thigh, and calf.
Caroline’s sister Hermie’s daughter is named Dorothy. She wrote a book about her Grandmother Dorothy, Caroline’s mother. The book began as a story, as family legend: the time Dorothy and her friend Rosamond, two unmarried Smithies, back from traveling Europe and bored with Auburn society life, took jobs as schoolteachers in the mountains of Elkhead, Colorado. All they had were each other and a few big trunks stuffed with silk shirts and long skirts. They took the train out West, settled into their room in a homesteaders’ cabin (where they shared a small bed), and began to teach the children of other homesteaders and of miners – in a small, one-room stone cabin on a hill, the Parthenon of Elkhead.

Caroline believes her mother couldn’t have survived Lem’s death without having first lived through Colorado. There, Mother had dealt with hunger and cold and had met Indians and fended off rough men (not to mention raccoons). These experiences made her a strong woman, Caroline knew. They made her independent and different. They had something to do with her working, which the other mothers didn’t do. These experiences made her special – to Caroline – and when Caroline thought of her mother in Colorado, she felt proud. She knew Mother would survive.

Dorothy set an example in the Hillman household of a fighting spirit and strong woman role model. Her husband had been active in church-sponsored events and charities, but Dorothy had stood on soapboxes for the right to vote. She had gone to Smith. She had always been involved in issues of social justice and equality – she had stood up for women, poor wage earners, and for racial and religious minorities. She encouraged Caroline to join clubs, to attend lectures (one by Amelia Earhart
stands out, though all Caroline writes in her diary is: *Amelia Earhart was wonderful! She was so sweet, natural, and very pretty*), and to read and learn as much as possible. She gave Caroline a copy of Anna Shaw’s autobiography when she was fifteen.

Dorothy was strong, and Caroline knew it. Caroline admired her. She tried in all that she did to be like her and to please her.

With her father gone and her mother working, Caroline, as the eldest daughter, felt she should assume some of the parental and household responsibilities. She worked hard at keeping the house tidy, running errands, and organizing and cleaning out drawers for her mother. She helped Hermie with her schoolwork and read to her before bed. In her memory, these were difficult years. She never had any
time for herself or new dresses to wear to school. But she also remembers foreign language tutors, dance lessons, voice lessons, summer camps, vacations to a cottage on Lake Michigan, a live-in cook, a gardener, and a woman who came once a week to do mending and sewing. Of course the children had to have these things. They all went to the public elementary and high schools, for one, and Dorothy was trying to keep up appearances, maybe most of all for the children’s own sake. Today, my grandmother says, “You see, how could we have thought we were poor when we vacationed at the lake?”

As Caroline’s 1936 diary reveals, they really weren’t poor. She did have new dresses, nice silk and lace ones, and tailored tweed suits; she went out to the movies almost weekly; the family were members of a local country club; there was always live-in help. Caroline’s parents had been members of the Grand Rapids “elite.” They had been active in many clubs, committees, and charities. Both came from relatively wealthy families. The “other elites,” as my grandmother remembers them, must have helped her mother find a job and invited Dorothy and the children to their lake homes. They “tried very hard to help out,” she remembers, and she’s sure her mother’s parents sent money, too.

Though she remembers her own hardship – perhaps more vividly than her many privileges – she also remembers others less fortunate. Caroline’s understanding of the world was shaped in large part by her mother’s Red Cross work. One night in March 1936 a “young, handsome, and very nice” field representative ate dinner with the Hillmans. He and Dorothy discussed recent floods in Massachusetts. It was Dorothy’s responsibility to raise $7,000 for the emergency relief fund to help those
displaced or otherwise affected by the floods. “The situation is very exciting but horrible,” fifteen-year-old Caroline wrote in her diary. Today, my grandmother remembers a flood in Grand Rapids. Her mother brought her along to deliver food and supplies to the poor people who lived in settlements along the banks of the Grand River.

Dinners at the Hillman household, before and after Daddy died, were prepared by the cook and served to the family. Each place setting had at least four utensils, each bowl had a plate, each cup a saucer. The children and their mother stayed out of the kitchen; Dorothy could only make cocoa and creamed potatoes. At the table, Mother required the children to call out before speaking: first speaking, second speaking, third speaking, and fourth. The boys always spoke first and for the longest. After they’d told Mother about their friends and school and asked questions they had, they’d turn to Caroline, and taunt her: And what do you have to say, Caroline? On cue, she’d burst into tears and Mother would “dismiss” her to the pantry; crying was not tolerated at the dinner table.

After the meal, the children could, if they chose, line up outside Mother’s bedroom to speak with her privately. Again, the boys were usually first, then Caroline, and then baby Hermie. Caroline never asked her mother to tell her brothers to quit teasing her. She accepted her shyness as a fault. Looking back, she thinks her mother could have done more for her self-esteem, but she doesn’t blame her.
My grandmother has a few files, folders, and boxes full of material on her father. She inherited the collection from her mother, who had dutifully gathered it all after his death. She is now The Keeper of these files, likely the largest existing source of information on Lemuel Hillman’s life. She doesn’t reference the files. She knows their contents by heart and revisiting them, even infrequently, is painful. I’m the first one to see them in years.

A box with a handwritten label – “Dad” – includes: a folder of photographs, both professional portraits and family snapshots, of Lemuel as a boy, as a young man, and as an adult as well as of him with his wife and children, of him and Caroline, of his parents, and of him with his brothers; 3-4 articles clipped from several Grand Rapids newspapers reporting his death, February 21, 1930, with titles like, Banker, Wife Hit While Going to Friends’ Home; Financier Killed, Wife Hurt By Car; Lemuel Hillman Is Eulogized At Church Service; at least one and usually more photocopies of each clipping; “Resolutions Upon the Death of Lemuel S. Hillman,” a typewritten memorandum by Members of the Board of Trustees of the Grand Rapids Art Association; copies and copies and copies of Hillman genealogy, including hand-drawn family trees, and among the pages of genealogy, a photocopy of a single page from The Columbia Encyclopedia containing an entry on “Huguenots” and a computer printout of a webpage titled “Huguenots, An Introduction”; a letter addressed to Mrs. J. H. Woodruff, postmarked February 19, 6 pm, 1930 with the words “My last letter from Lem –” in ink across an edge of the envelope; a series of church programs, one with a photograph of “The Youth Window,” presented “In Memory of Lemuel S. Hillman”; a clipping from Grand Rapids Press describing
Dorothy and Lemuel’s wedding; and a small, rectangular clipping from an unidentified publication noting that an anonymous gift of $100 had been made in Lemuel Hillman’s name after his death.

In the summers, the Hillmans often went to Lake Michigan for a few weeks. They had family and friends who had cottages there. Many photographs exist in unlabeled scrapbooks and albums in my grandmother’s apartment of tiny bundled babies in cribs on a wrap-around porch, of women in long dresses walking in the sand, of tree-sized driftwood. “You don’t see that anymore,” my grandmother tells me, pointing out the large branches on the shore. Turn the page and small children run and play in the surf with their father, and again: bigger children years later run and play alone, their father no longer with them.
Caroline enjoyed the lake but, as a teen, she would pass up summers there for summers at camp – first as a camper and then as a counselor – at the Y.W.C.A. Today she tells me she loved camp, and the next words out of her mouth are almost always that her sister Hermie hated it. She says the same about attending Smith College. They’re very different, Caroline and Hermione, and they’ll both tell you so.

In 1932, when she was 11, Caroline went to camp and wrote about it in her diary.

June 30, 1932: *Here I am at camp.*

July 1, 1932: *I am in Cabin 6. My counselor’s name is Miss Smith.*

July 4, 1932: *Am having a grand time at camp this summer.*

July 7, 1932: *A lot of kids think I am stuck up.*

July 8, 1932: *I am riding a lot.*

July 9, 1932: *Nobody likes me.*

July 12, 1932: *Am homesick.*

July 13, 1932: *I am all right now.*

July 19, 1932: *Hermie did a dance with her cabin. She was an ant in the “Grasshopper and the Ants.” It was very cute.*

The rest of the summer is blank; the next entry is September 7, 1932: *School has started. I am in Central High.* That entry and the ones from camp are written in pencil, in a young cursive script. Just above the September 7 entry, my ninety-year-old grandmother, knowing I would read her diary, made a note in blue ink indicating that she had been starting the seventh grade. “*Don’t make notes in ink in your diary,*”
I begged her. She did, though, of course, and they were notes like this one. She wants

certain things to be known.

Caroline left home for Smith College in 1938. She’d been “crazy about

Smith” at least since she was fifteen, when she first visited the campus. Her mother

had graduated from Smith in 1909, had founded the Grand Rapids Smith Club, and

visited campus whenever she was in the area. She loved Smith, and Caroline and

Hermione were both expected to attend. But Caroline felt insecure about her status

among the other young women at Smith. She lived, as her mother had, in Dawes

House, then a residence, which, according to Caroline, was the semi-exclusive home

of wealthy, traveled, private school girls from good, New England families – a perfect

fit for her mother. But Caroline had gone to public school in the Midwest. Although

she had been given French and Latin lessons, voice and piano lessons, summers at

camp and vacations, she felt inadequate. She struggled to find herself and couldn’t

make up her mind about what to do when she left school.

My grandmother remembers her lack of confidence, but also her role in

helping her friend and classmate Betty Friedan bring their hero and role model,

Eleanor Roosevelt, to campus to speak. The two young women traveled together

through the snow to the train station to escort Mrs. Roosevelt back to campus. Today,

my grandmother identifies herself as a feminist, and as an active participant in (what

she calls) “the pre-feminist movement.” She prefers woman doctors, tax preparers,

accountants, and physical therapists. She especially loves Hillary Clinton and
Michelle Obama. She continues to fight for gender, race, and class equality in her own way, and she identifies that fight with her mother and with Smith.
There is a series of professional photographs – titled, in pencil, “The Roundup, San Mateo, N.M., July 1944” – that depict life on Mr. Lee’s ranch during the time when Caroline stayed there. My grandmother has kept these pictures, about eighty of them, pasted onto both sides of heavy cardstock and held together with two binder rings, in one closet or another for almost seventy years. One of the photographs is of Caroline, 23 years old, smiling but squinting, eyes closed, and
wearing a black, wide-brimmed hat. She is kneeling on a calf whose mouth is open mid-squeal, eyes looking straight at the camera, crazed. An unidentified cowboy stands behind Caroline, gloved, and there is a cloud of smoke around the spot where he has just branded the calf’s behind. A girl, about fourteen, is squatting on the ground, in the dirt, holding one of the calf’s front legs and pinning the other down with her boot. This young woman is Harriett Lee and she is half of the reason Caroline is there, in that picture, on the ranch in 1944.

The other half is Harry, Harriett’s twin. They were known then as Bito and Bita – or simply as ‘the Bitos.’ They were Mr. and Mrs. Lee’s only children, and Caroline found a job through the Smith College vocational office as their tutor in Algebra, Biology, French, Latin, English, writing and typing. Mr. Lee, in another roundup photograph, wears a wrinkled buttondown shirt with a short striped tie, a large faded cowboy hat, and denim blue jeans, belt tight under his belly. He steps with his left foot on a calf’s two front legs while he prepares a shot of hormones. Bita is sitting cross-legged behind the calf, another leg in her lap. Bito stands back, observing, and Caroline watches too, kneeling on the calf’s neck and back.

The roundup would have been a change of pace for the twins, a chance to help with the cattle and sleep outside around a fire for a few days. They spent most of their time closer to the house, under Mrs. Lee’s and Caroline’s supervision. The Bitos sat with Caroline in a classroom off the courtyard and studied from breakfast until three or four in the afternoon, when they – and Caroline – would be dismissed to go ride. Caroline followed a government-approved lesson plan established by the University
of Maryland but, in the classroom, it was just the three of them. She was responsible for the children, she was “in charge” – and yet, she was learning, too. Mrs. Lee would teach the twins and Caroline the basics of Spanish, the shared language of the ranchers, Mexicans, Navajo, and cowboys. And Caroline would participate in all ranch activities, including cleaning, branding, herding and shearing the cattle and sheep. She would learn about ranch life, the West, cowboys and Indians, and the cattle industry. Right away, she pulled books from the Lees’ library: Last of the Mohicans, No Life For a Lady (Women of the West), Cattle, Horses, and Men, and a book called Sheep. She even read “all the stockman’s magazines etc.” and “the ‘cowboy’s wishbook’ – the Montgomery Ward Catalogue” to try to get a better, more complete sense of this new way of life.

Almost at once, Caroline fell in love with the New Mexico desert, life on the ranch, and the Lee family. The twins were sweet and well behaved (though Bita was very shy) and Mr. Lee was “a fine looking, weather beaten man – very kind, a wonderful sense of humor and a very hard worker”; but Caroline especially admired Mrs. Lee. She wrote to her mother,

She is the most versatile person you can imagine. She helped make a good deal of the ranch furniture and carved lovely designs in them. She made Mexican silver fixtures to cover up the modern ones when electricity was put in. She is a wonderful cook and thinks nothing of entertaining forty or fifty of Mr. Lee’s friends that stop in on a moment’s notice. At last year’s rodeo, she took the chuck wagon into town and for three days, three meals a day, she and the Mexican cook, Lalo, fed four hundred men. They did all the baking and everything. […] I’t’s a full time job just keeping the Navajos doing what they
are supposed to. Yesterday, Martin (the Navajo house boy) threw a flour sifter full of flour at her. It’s very hard to get good servants out here.

To Caroline, Mrs. Lee seemed an ideal role model. She was smart, strong and resourceful, but still “[thought] nothing of entertaining forty or fifty of Mr. Lee’s friends.” Of course, Mrs. Lee would have had the help of her half dozen Navajo house servants, but that too, to Caroline, indicated that Mrs. Lee was a good leader, and could keep “the Navajos doing what they [were] supposed to,” an apparently rather difficult task.

Mrs. Lee revealed to Caroline her dissatisfaction with the children’s previous tutor, Annie Johanna Smith. “Annie wasn’t at all friendly with the townspeople etc. and acted very superior,” Caroline wrote to her mother, and from then on, she made sure never to turn down an offer, and to enthusiastically take part in any and all ranch activities. A few weeks after she arrived, she joined Bito and Bita playing in the barn and a large silo, sounding, in her letter, almost like an anthropologist visiting a strange new world:

The Bitos love to jump the twenty or fifteen feet down into the partially filled silo and land into the damp, fly-infested, cut-up, but soft bed of corn. They were anxious to have me participate, so I did, and we spent most of the late afternoon there. The corn is sent whirling out of the machine onto us below. It soon covers us up which seems to be a source of great amusement to the Bitos. […] [Later] I insisted on learning to milk a cow, which I proceeded to do. It wasn’t hard but I was never sure the cow wouldn’t kick me. After I had about half milked one cow I had had enough. All in all, I felt that I had spent quite a typical farmer boy’s afternoon. There are certainly lots of things to do on a farm.
In the weeks following her arrival by train, still in late September, Caroline drove out over the range in a truck with cowboys to the sheep corral to pick up some sheep and she got her first glimpse of the land and the size of the ranch. She saw where and how the Navajo people lived – “in sort of covered wagons off by themselves for months at a time.” She visited the town of San Mateo, seven miles away and visible from the house, which “consist[ed] only of adobe huts in which the natives live.” She drove out with Pete, the ranch manager, to deliver supplies to herdsmen on the property. She went dancing in Grants – and danced with “all of Grants’ ‘prominent citizens,’” including “the editor of the ‘Beacon,’ the mayor, the town barber, cow punchers etc.” At the dance, she saw “two cowboys with bloody shirts” who had been “knived [sic] by some Cubans.” She helped the Bitos wash and comb their 1,000-pound prize heifers, and after that helped them wash seven dogs. 

And she began preparing the twins for the coming school year. Life in New Mexico was absolutely opposite from everything Caroline knew, and she loved it.

The Lees’ ranch home was low and wide, a square of connected rooms, most opening into an enormous courtyard and patio – once an area for stagecoaches to deposit their passengers and goods, now a garden of grass and flowers. The house was huge – thirty-two rooms, one story – and the walls were all adobe, thirty-six inches thick. Each room had a fireplace, the only heat in the house, and Navajo rugs covered bare floors. The house stood at the end of a twenty-mile dirt road off of Route 66 and, Caroline wrote to her mother, had once been owned by a rich Spanish
rancher. Beautiful trees, the only ones for fifty miles, lined the road leading up to the ranch. Through the trees and right up and under a wide, grand entrance into the courtyard – from there, into the rooms and, on the other side, the fields and the hills, the hills that Caroline would look out over before breakfast, watching the Lees’ horses, about twenty of them, running in a group, manes and tails whipping behind them.

The Lees’ property included over three hundred thousand acres, then the second largest property in New Mexico. Understandably, the ranch – and Mr. Floyd W. Lee – had a local reputation. Indeed, Mr. Lee would go on to become a state senator. Men dropped by, trying to buy or sell cattle, sheep, or horses, or trying to work for a few days. Mr. Lee and some of his men traveled to Denver and other places for cattle shows and made deals for giant steers worth thousands and thousands of dollars. Journalists and photographers occasionally arrived from out of town for a story – either about ranch life, or maybe about the remaining Navajo people. Sometimes the story was just about the land, the ranch. It was that big. The nearest town (besides the mud hut village of San Mateo), Grants, was small, though, just a few hundred people. And the Lees were certainly “prominent citizens.” They were expected, every year, to participate in the town’s Labor Day parade. Caroline arrived in early September 1942 and just a few days later, decked out in borrowed western-style clothing and still learning how to get on and off a horse, she was riding in a parade celebrating Grants, New Mexico’s 1942 Labor Day Rodeo, the biggest event of the year.
In those days Grants was just a single street near a train station. Bars with swinging saloon-style doors and a few other buildings lined the street, drunk Indians and cowboys leaning up against the walls, horses tied up out front. “Just like a picture,” as my grandmother remembers it, “they had swinging doors just the way you’d see in the movies.” Many of the young American men, few though there were in Grants, had already been shipped overseas, to the war. More joined them every day. For hours, it seemed, endless train cars would roll by, G.I.’s hanging out the windows, smoking or waving. Then there would be cars of jeeps and trucks followed by more soldiers heading west. On the ranch, off the twenty-mile dirt road lined with trees, the war was really only felt in two ways: rationed gasoline and more Navajo ranch hands. The ranch was, in many ways, a world of its own.
Caroline’s tutoring position with the Lees lasted one year and ended in August 1943. The twins took their exams, and Bito prepared to leave for Andover or Exeter to complete his education. Caroline – in love with New Mexico and ranch life – didn’t want to leave. She had grown very close to the Lees. Outside immediate family, “they are the best friends I have ever had,” she wrote home. But Mother hoped Caroline would visit her older brother Serrell in New York and refine herself, work on her “polish, sophistication, maturity.” Serrell supported the plan, and he and his wife invited Caroline to New York for the summer. Caroline wrote back with a firm, no. She felt she had to defend her love of New Mexico, and herself.

Besides the family [the Lees], it’s this ideal country, the climate, the riding, and the mode of living out here that I so hate to leave. […] Serrell feels, I imagine, that this has been a narrowing year for me. On the contrary, it has done more to teach me what life is really like than ten years at home could have done. I’ve learned valuable lessons in appreciating the simple and basic things in life, knowing all kinds of people, getting along under one roof with different people under extremely difficult circumstances, having not too easy a job, nor having things smoothed over too easily for me. After all, Mother, poise and maturity come out of just such experiences as I have had this year and not necessarily from city associations with the type of people I have always known. […] Remember, this is my first year out of college and I can’t see that any paragon of maturity and sophistication and complete poise can be expected. That’s no reason for my standing still but – I honestly don’t believe I’ve stood still this year. I’ve learned a great deal and hope I’ve grown up some (even if at the poor Lees’ expense).
Caroline also sensed that her mother and Serrell were worried she might become involved with a cowboy, particularly Pete, the Lees’ live-in ranch manager. Caroline and Pete had grown close, but Caroline wasn’t looking for a husband in New Mexico. She hoped her mother and brother could see that: “Peter is not the only thing I have on my mind – by any matter of means. You know that, don’t you? I hope so.”

Caroline applied to teach English at the Brownmoor School in Santa Fe, a small boarding school for girls a few hours from the ranch, and she was hired for the 1943-4 school year. Bita would attend, one of just fifty students. A brochure for the school announces, “In the course of the year we see the most interesting of the dances in the Indian pueblos. The names of the pueblos and the Spanish villages are romance itself: Chimayo and Cordova, San Felipe and Santa Cruz.” The brochure also provides a daily schedule, which includes “the Indian drum beats” at 7:00 am and “games, riding, dancing” from 2:30 to 4:30 pm. In addition, the girls had thirty minutes dedicated to “dressing for dinner” each evening and ate a snack of “milk and cookies” every day from 5:00 to 5:15 pm. School expenses for students amounted to $1,600 and covered “board, tuition, use of infirmary, instruction in art or music, textbooks, riding, and expeditions of not more than one day” – a price the Lees, though relatively few others, could easily afford. Mr. Lee even gave Caroline a horse for the year; she named it Brownie. My grandmother still has the “contract” – a letter drafted in Spanish by Mr. Lee on Fernandez Company, Incorporated (“Breeders and Dealers in Cattle and Sheep”) letterhead – which records the sale of the horse from a local Mexican-Indian to Mr. Lee.
Caroline and Bita visited the Lees and the ranch often over the course of the school year. Though Caroline went home in May, she returned in July to help with the roundup and say her goodbyes to the Lees and to New Mexico. Brownmoor was in the process of implementing a plan to relocate to Phoenix and, anyway, Caroline had made up her mind to go overseas. She had been supplementing her teaching with volunteer work in Santa Fe, offering support and supplies to the families of soldiers. But she felt far removed from the war effort, and she desperately wanted to get closer. She saw volunteering abroad as a way to gain new experiences, expand her world. Her mother and Serrell would have probably liked to see her move to New York, but Caroline had made her decision, and her family couldn’t argue with the Red Cross.
4| “Somewhere in Italy”

*If we can make a good club and help out these poor kids stuck over here – that’s all that counts – and the reward will be great. But right now it’s tough going.*

During the summer of 1944, while she waited for her Red Cross application to be processed and accepted, Caroline worked at the Bissell Carpet Sweeper factory, which had been converted to produce de-icers for military planes. The Bissells were family friends, my grandmother tells me with a smile; Anna Bissell had taken over after her husband died in 1889 – the first female corporate CEO in America. “Oh, of course we knew them,” my grandmother tells me, “If you were elite in Grand Rapids, you knew the other elites.” Caroline’s brother Doug, a pilot stationed in Italy during the war, would later tell her that de-icers were simply too heavy, they were always removed. But as far as she knew, she was helping any way she could, waiting impatiently for her training to start.

In late August, Caroline began orientation at Red Cross National Headquarters in Washington, DC. “The girls in our group are all kinds + colors – many from the south – almost 120 in all – only half of which are staff assistants – the rest are hospital aides. Our training is going to be very interesting – and the whole program is beautifully organized down to every last detail – delightful men and women for instructors,” she wrote home to her mother and her sister Hermie, who was still in
high school. She was in Washington for just under a month, and she was thrilled. Everything was exciting, interesting, and new – even the “strict military rule” which the girls lived by and the great big room where fifty-five of them slept, each with a few square feet to herself. She was happy – ready to begin her adventure. It all seemed “too good to be true.”
In my grandmother’s files is a photocopy of a typewritten document stamped “SECRET” and dated 9 September 1944. It includes a list of Red Cross Staff Assistants and Assistant Club Directors and Hospital Staff Assistants who were to “proceed without delay to the Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation, Newport News, Virginia, reporting upon arrival thereat to the Commanding General” and then to “report to the senior American Red Cross official, Naples, Italy, for suitable assignment within his designated area.” Caroline B. Hillman, Staff Asst., is the third name from the bottom of the first column; a check has been made next to her name. “Travel by water surface vessel is directed.”

In late September, the ship carrying my grandmother, hundreds of other Red Cross personnel and thousands of soldiers left Virginia for Italy. From then on, her letters would be opened, censored, and closed up again, stamped and resealed with a now-yellowing tape: OPENED BY: U.S. ARMY EXAMINER. The name of the ship, the places it stopped, and the date it finally dropped my grandmother off in Italy have all been removed from the letters with four clean cuts from a sharp blade. Her mother would send her letters on to Caroline’s brothers and their wives, to her sister, Hermie, and to her aunts and friends. A few of the letters show her mother’s handwritten additions – short comments, clarifications, responses – intended for future recipients. Nevertheless, Caroline almost always addressed her letters to her “dearest Mother” or “Mother darling.”

On the ship, the soldiers and Red Cross girls enjoyed themselves as best they could. They danced and listened to music, played ping-pong and boxed (the girls
watched), went on dinner dates, and sat out on the deck in the sun. All doors and portholes were closed from 6:00 pm to 7:00 am – “the blackout” – so the ship would not be seen by enemy ships. But that didn’t seem to stop anyone. “It’s hard to believe that this is a troop ship when you can sit on deck in the bright moonlight and hear good music and singing. It’s just too much to expect,” Caroline wrote. But days and nights came and went – weeks passed – and though they had reached the Italian coast, no one left the ship. Until, one Saturday afternoon,

All the troops debarked except our small [Red Cross] group. It was hard seeing those boys go off to war. They were loaded down with equipment and it was pouring rain. The whole thing was pretty grim – as we stood on the deck in the rain and waved them goodbye till we could see them no more. We are a forlorn group – wandering around this empty ship. It’s not the same as when our friends were aboard and we had so many good times together. The war has been brought very close to us – and we are definitely a sober lot of girls. What we saw yesterday was something few R.C. girls ever do – and it was only due to unavoidable circumstances that we saw what we did. As I said – it was a thrilling day – but it was really more sad than exciting. I felt very depressed and lonely last night for the first time since I left – but today I am only anxious to be on our way again.

Watching her new friends march off the ship, as if into battle, was difficult for Caroline. Many of the other R.C. girls were returning to duty after up to two years abroad – in India, northern Africa, France. But Caroline hadn’t seen any of this firsthand. She’d watched soldiers in trains roll slowly by in Grants, ready to ship out, and she’d worked on the home front in a converted factory. All her life, she had listened to her mother, who had made a career out of her Red Cross work (and,
indeed, had just accepted a promotion, and moved to Alexandria, Virginia) – but nothing could have prepared Caroline for this. Those were her friends, those enlisted men who had been “packed in like sardines” on the ship, looking like “so many degraded, herded animals.” She couldn’t wait to get off – to help them, join them – and to begin her work, wherever and whatever it would be.

When she finally arrived in southern Italy in mid-October, 1944, Caroline was assigned to a Red Cross club for enlisted men in Foggia, a city the Allies had reduced to rubble a year earlier. An estimated 20,000 civilians had been killed there. The relatively flat area was now used as an important Allied airfield; it was a safe distance from active fighting farther north, but close enough to provide the Allies with an opportunity to strike new targets in France, Germany, and the Balkans. Southern Italy, where Caroline’s brother Doug had also been stationed up until a week before Caroline arrived, was not the most popular destination for soldiers or Red Cross personnel. Many wished they had been sent closer to the action. “There is literally nothing in the town where I am!” Caroline wrote to her brother, Serrell, “No restaurants, hotels, shops, nice homes, decent people – nothing but bombed buildings, mud, dirty crowds of people and the U.S. Army – and, of course, the Red Cross!” The streets were filled with soldiers and sailors and pilots who would smile and stop her on the sidewalk to talk. She felt as though everyone was glad to see her, a fresh-faced American girl in the cold, damp, filthy streets.

The club in Foggia was a large one by Red Cross standards – with a staff of nine American personnel and up to one hundred and fifty Italians working as truck
American Red Cross

"Somewhere in Italy"
Wednesday morning
October 1944

Dearest Mother -

Well, here I am at last after twenty days at sea! The annulled Monday at noon. It was certainly a wonderful trip. I can tell you know that we stopped at and were there in the harbor for forty-eight hours. If you'll look on the map, you'll see it is very near which was recently taken. You is only 10 miles from the.

The destruction we saw there was terrific. Seeing friends from the ship at was pretty hard - and I hope I don't have to go through anything like that again. It's left a lump in my throat that just won't go away. The boys are stationed at Rome so perhaps we'll have a chance to get to gather...
drivers, barbers, housekeepers, cooks and dishwashers. Eight to ten thousand American soldiers came through the club, housed in the former town hall, each day. They came for everything from a hot shower to coffee and sandwiches to the latest newspapers, magazines and music to foreign language classes and fencing lessons—and, of course, they came for company. They swapped stories, and Caroline listened from her post behind the information desk or snack bar. Her friends back home had been optimistic about an early end to the European war but the boys coming back from missions told a different story. The German resistance in northern Italy was stubborn—“so fantastically strong”—and Caroline soon realized she and the boys were in for “a long, hard winter of fighting.”
The club was open from 9 am to 10 pm every day of the week and Caroline spent nearly all her waking hours there. She had one day off each week and could do as she pleased in the evenings after the club had closed. She considered dances and dates a part of her job, and even though she was almost always exhausted, she rarely turned down an offer. She liked to compare her job overseas to “running a four ring circus.” It was fun, she insisted, and interesting. “Best of all, though,” she wrote, “is the feeling I have that there’s an important job to be done here – and that, in some way, I can really help out.” She never lost sight of why she was there, of why the Red Cross clubs existed: for the boys.

Caroline loved serving the enlisted men, working for and alongside them. She empathized with them; they were her friends. “I’ve learned a lot since I’ve been over here – I’m glad to say – and it’s come mostly from working with men all day long,” she wrote to her mother. Indeed, at the club, Caroline was in a completely new environment, one which allowed her to have meaningful, platonic relationships with men her age. She had them over to her room for tea or beer, went to dances with them. “Women – when they work – take everything (including themselves) so seriously – they get all wound up and intense – and, after, they worry unnecessarily,” she wrote. “I find that working with men, as I do, has taught me to relax much more – to take things much less seriously – and not to worry over the things that I can’t do anything about.” However, Caroline didn’t have much sympathy for some of the other Red Cross girls. In November 1944 Caroline wrote home, frustrated. Another girl, Georgie, was having a hard time adapting to life in wartime Italy. Caroline wrote,
[Georgie’s] not “goofy” – but she is mentally in a very bad state. She weeps at the drop of a hat – has no confidence in herself – is constantly depressed, etc. Of course – she never should have come over here. She’s not able to “take it” over here – and without a stable constitution both mentally and emotionally – a girl is of no use over here. I doubt if the psychiatrist can help her out. If she’s a weak person – all the medicine in the world won’t help her. I’d like to spank her and make her stick to her job over here – till she realizes she has no choice but stay and like it. In the meantime, it leaves us with one less girl in the club and more work for the rest of us to do.

Caroline had little patience for those who were unable or unwilling to do their jobs. She often complained of a lack of enthusiasm among the younger girls – they were bored and boring and that drove Caroline crazy. She made friends with the older, more experienced, often married women.

In early November, less than a month after Caroline’s arrival, the club’s program director was transferred to a different theater along with a few other R.C. girls. In the shuffling around of the remaining personnel, Caroline was put in charge of the club’s program. “The job involves planning and supervising the program – hiring Italian bands and artists, getting G.I. talent and booking it – making the majority of important contacts for the club – planning all the special parties, etc. It’s a big job,” Caroline wrote to her mother. She was excited, of course, but she was also just a staff assistant – and one with only a few weeks on the job. She thought a club so large should have a trained program director and “it should be a man.” But her
superiors believed in her, and she knew she could do as good a job as anyone. In fact, she felt she could probably even do better.

By Thanksgiving, Caroline reported that everyone seemed to think she was doing a great job and that she was really enjoying her new responsibilities. Indeed, she listed her responsibility to the club as one of the things she was most thankful for. One difficult task, she confessed to her mother, was “learning to develop a genuine ‘smile on the job’” as she was often busy, worried, stressed, and tired. Her smile must have been convincing; two weeks later, she wrote, “one very nice boy told me to-day that he’d never known a Red Cross girl so generally well-liked as, he said, I was.” A few boys in particular – Was, Jake, and Dave – became good friends, and would hang around the club for hours and help her by painting signs, typing up reports and cleaning the craft shop. Jake often drove her around town in a jeep to gather supplies, and the two would stay up late in her small room drinking warm rationed beer or indulging in snacks sent from home.

The winter months soon gave way to springtime. Caroline had passed the time keeping herself busy and going to dances – enlisted men’s, officers’, and Italian; the Italians, she told her mother, “danced like Americans.” Caroline even helped organize a dance at the club, the first with Italian girls. She met with the local mayor and a committee of the town’s ladies to convince them to let the Red Cross host the party. The Italians were so old-fashioned, she complained. They wanted multiple chaperones per girl – “they insisted in bringing aunts, uncles, babies, and everybody.” Finally, after over an hour of angry back-and-forth all in Italian (Caroline was relying...
on an interpreter), they managed to come to an agreement. And, when the night came, the dance was a huge success. They had snacks and drinks and trays of cigarettes – “all part of our propaganda to win over the townspeople so we can have these dances every week.”

By late March, however, Caroline was thankful to be able to explore the area. One Sunday morning she went for a hike and a picnic with Jake, and two other friends.

As we hiked down the road – the planes were returning from their mission – flying quite low, directly overhead, in beautiful formation. They looked like great silver birds with the sun shining on the metal fuselage. What a contrast it made with the peaceful, picturesque countryside – and how hard it was to believe that these planes had, not so long ago, been great instruments of death and destruction.

Before stopping for lunch – we went up to one of the farmhouses and asked for some vino. The whole neighborhood soon gathered around to stare at us. Chairs were brought out of the house and the four of us sat stiffly in a straight row while we sampled the wine and were continuously looked at – as though we were a great object of curiosity (which no doubt we were). The wine was good – we traded a bottle for a can of tomato juice – and went on our way. We finally stopped for lunch – in the middle of a great field. It was marvelous getting out of that dirty, smelly, over-crowded town – and we all had a marvelous time.

Caroline had also begun to plan for her leave – a roadtrip with Jake and another young woman through the Italian countryside with stops in Naples, Florence, Rome, Assisi and many small, rural towns. Jake would drive the jeep and serve as
mechanic; Caroline would make a list of things not to miss. But before she left, Caroline put in a request to be transferred upon her return to one of two new beach clubs opening up in Manfredonia – just twenty-two miles from the club in Foggia – for the summer. She wanted to run the enlisted men’s club; the other club would be for officers only. She crossed her fingers, packed up the jeep – “a beaten up old amphibian which had been all through Africa” with no lights or top – and the trio left for Naples.

The drive was beautiful: rolling hills, long rows of cypress trees, and steep mountains in the distance. Even the peasants seemed “cleaner and more picturesque,” dressed in light, colorful clothing and carrying big baskets or jars on their heads. But there were also reminders of battles fought and lost: deserted German guns, tanks, and other equipment; battle-scarred buildings, punctured with holes from artillery fire; a German cemetery marked by a big, black swastika; shell cases strewn along the roads; bomb craters; warnings in German and English of buried mines; massive piles of rubble where entire towns once stood; and trees “shorn of their branches,” “twisted and black.”

Naples and Rome didn’t impress Caroline. Naples, she wrote to her mother, “is still the worst town I’ve ever been in. The town is full of thieves and beggars, and the poverty is terrible.” Rome was nice, but ultimately disappointing: “I wasn’t nearly as impressed as I’d expected to be.” Assisi was, by far, the highlight of the trip. She felt transported into the Italian countryside of hundreds of years ago – the town was surrounded by a high wall, with four stone gates, and all around were hills and mountains; narrow, winding cobblestone roads took them past castles, blooming
flowers hanging down from every windowsill. And the group met a kind of tour
guide, “a very interesting English lady” named Mrs. Perkins. She and her husband,
Caroline reported, were both famous art critics and had had a big, beautiful home in
Florence filled with 12th century treasures – all stolen or destroyed by the Germans.
The Perkins had been imprisoned in nearby Perugia and later interned in their house
in Assisi for four long years without sufficient food or supplies. Mrs. Perkins related
the story of the German occupation of Assisi, and pointed out to Caroline and her
friends a few Italian fascists “roaming free as air.” There were still Germans, too, she
said – in hiding. Caroline loved to listen to her, always eager to gain a new
perspective on the war. But the real treat – for Caroline and for Mrs. Perkins – was a
trip to the Basilica of St. Francis, where the group spent four peaceful hours
discussing the famous – and thankfully, unharmed – frescoes there.

After the long drive home, Caroline learned that she had been granted her
transfer to the enlisted men’s beach club; she would set up and operate the club for
the entire summer by herself; “a club of my own,” she called it. She immediately
drove to Manfredonia to check out the beach and the future club. The location was
ideal, the perfect stretch of beach, and steep, rocky mountains in the distance
reminded her of New Mexico; the building, on the other hand, nearly brought her to
tears. Caroline toured the tiny farmhouse, stepping carefully over the dirt and
cobblestone floors, edging her way around the belongings of the inhabitants – who
were still occupying the “dark, dirty, damp” rooms when she arrived. There was a
barn full of animals. She knew the building had possibilities, but it angered her that
the officers already had at least seven beautiful clubs on the beach and this, the first beach club for enlisted men for miles, was all area command could do. She left and headed back to Foggia, already full of ideas for the club. First, “it [would] have to be almost completely rebuilt.”

The Army began renovating the farmhouse in mid-May at Caroline’s request. Meanwhile, she kept herself busy trying to locate furnishings, make arrangements for the snack bar, hire ten Italians to help in the club, get a truck, find 500 cups, saucers and spoons and white jackets for the busboys – and “beg, borrow or steal” all other necessary equipment. She was so busy, she had little time to think or write about the recent end to fighting in Europe. Besides, the Red Cross was still asking for more girls from home, and had plans to stick around for at least a few more months. They had closed a few clubs, but were also planning to open new ones, especially farther north. “Life around here,” Caroline wrote, “seems little different from before V-E day – except that there’s much less work for the boys to do,” which, of course, meant all the more work for her.

Caroline’s beach club opened June 6, 1945 and was a tremendous success, despite not having electricity or ice or most of the luxuries of the huge Foggia club. The snack bar sold out of sandwiches every day. Caroline knew the nearby bakery could only sell them so much bread, but she still managed to increase the amount of sandwiches from 1,600 to at least 2,000 per day. She loved being busy, and being in charge. She liked being the one to whom others had to defer. And she was good at her job, too. She was promoted in late July to an “assistant program directorship” and
now made $200 each month, $125 of which she sent straight home to her mother to save for her return.

In August, the long-awaited V-J day arrived. Caroline thought of home, and of her family celebrating – but only briefly. “Over here – there’s a general feeling of relief and excitement – but it’s subdued because these boys are still a long way from getting home. And – too – there’s almost nothing to do to celebrate. A lot of the boys get drunk – and many more are given two days off – but are restricted to camp,” she wrote. The club was busier than ever and Caroline had little time to reflect. She and the boys she knew weren’t going anywhere. “We certainly have a huge task ahead – to make our world one of lasting peace and harmony,” she commented to her mother, before changing the subject. Caroline was interested in the new opportunities she might now have: she hoped to take a leave to Cairo and Palestine and transfer in
September (when the beach club would close) to Germany. “Occupation in this theater has so much more to offer – in an educational, cultural line,” she wrote to her mother. She was excited – for the boys, of course, but also for herself. Everything had changed, she knew, and she was going to make the best of it.
After one year in Italy, Caroline was reassigned to Giessen, Germany. Giessen had been nearly leveled by the Allies during the war; only 15% of the city still stood. But many roads and railroads went through the town, and it had served as a marshalling yard and supply depot for the Germans. Now, the Allies controlled the area and used Giessen as their own supply depot, which would service all of American-occupied Germany. Many of the tens of thousands soldiers stationed there after the war ended were black transport units; they lived in sprawling tent cities a few miles outside town.

Caroline remembers being “surrounded by ill feelings and difficult situations” from all sides. Here, she would be working with “the dregs” of the military, the last to leave. Many of the men were uneducated and crude – and some were violent – but Caroline had requested to work with enlisted men; among them, she felt most needed. Still, she was not too enthusiastic about the sound of Giessen.

On October 6, 1945 – the day after Caroline arrived in Giessen – she wrote to her mother: “I might just as well laugh as cry about my new assignment – though last night I could easily have cried about the whole thing. All I can say is that this really is
going to be an experience. I thought Foggia was bad, but it’s nothing compared to this!”

Caroline had arrived in Giessen about four o’clock the previous afternoon with two other white American Red Cross girls. They were to begin work immediately on a club for the various groups of white soldiers traveling through the destroyed city. Traveling with them – Caroline, Dot Levy, and Cynthia – was another young woman with the Red Cross, Mrs. McAlister, who was to open a separate club for the majority of the soldiers in Giessen and the surrounding area, the “colored boys.” Caroline and the other women thought separate clubs for white and black soldiers was a horrendous idea; Caroline didn’t even really approve of separate clubs for officers and enlisted men. But the Red Cross girls had to follow Army orders. The Army sanctioned and supported the Red Cross’s presence, and without that support, the Red Cross would have to leave.

As their truck came to a stop in Giessen, the young women already sensed that they were only just beginning a very difficult journey. In all directions: ruins. They had orders to locate the R.C. field director, and had been told that he had made arrangements for their temporary room and board. “In typical fashion, [Red Cross] hq’s. doesn’t know what’s going on in the field! No one knew the field director or anything about us – so finally we drove ten miles to another little town where we found the field director. The R.C. didn’t even know where he was located nor had they let him know we were coming!” Caroline wrote home in frustration.

The women were finally taken to a small inn for the evening, where they were greeted “by a very obnoxious crude [lieutenant] who was half drunk.” When he saw
Mrs. McAlister among them, the lieutenant shouted: “I won’t take that dirty nigger in my [building]!” The women were furious. They were asked to eat in a tiny room, alone, with the doors closed. And, to top the whole evening off, it seemed to the young Red Cross women, that same rude officer “had a German girl in his room” that night – an unfortunate regularity in Giessen, as Caroline would write home month after month. She could never get used to American soldiers – white or black – fraternizing with German girls.

But the coming weeks would not be better. The situation in Giessen was miserable. Tension among black enlisted men and white officers sometimes resulted in open fighting in the streets. The black majority was quick to defend themselves against perceived confrontation and, Caroline reported, almost a soldier per night was killed in a race-related brawl. In addition, thousands of displaced persons roamed the streets, carrying their possessions on their backs, navigating the ruins. They were searching for family members and food, for peace.

In many of her letters home Caroline describes and re-describes the situation: the ruins, the soldiers, the defeated civilians. It was all she had to talk about; she sometimes went a week or more without a newspaper or magazine or mail. In one such letter, written November 4, 1945 to her family, she writes:

Giessen is such a drab, dismal place. You can walk for blocks and blocks and see nothing but rows of gutted ruins – not one house standing – the rubble stacked up along the sidewalks. There are about four shops open – but nothing is for sale of any interest. There are no cafes for the boys to go to – there is no place but the movies. It’s hard to explain the city as it really is because it’s hard to describe the atmosphere, but there is a complete lack of enthusiasm or
interest or gaiety anywhere about. The people look dazed or defiant or simply heartsick. You see many cripples about the streets, German soldiers recently released – looking completely beaten and spiritless, and then you always see the people without homes who are constantly on the road moving from one place to another – looking for a place to live or trying to locate their families. They stand on the corners trying to get rides, all their possessions tied on to their backs – and they look frightened and hungry. And always you see vast numbers of girls, from sixteen on up, who depend entirely on the soldiers for their livelihood – they are a depressing group, girls who would have led decent lives if it hadn’t been for the war – but now their lives are ruined.

And yet, she ends with this conclusion:

This letter may sound unenthusiastic – which I don’t mean it to be. It’s not a pretty world over here and I can only write you how I feel about it. It doesn’t mean I’m unhappy – in fact I’m absorbed with my job and interested to see what I can do with it. The obstacles are trying and aggravating, but they present a real challenge and make it more of an accomplishment – when the job is done. I wouldn’t want to stay here indefinitely, but I don’t expect that I’ll have to. In the meantime, this is an interesting assignment and I’m learning a lot.

It took nearly two months before the enlisted men’s club in Giessen – The Cup and Saucer – opened in a beautiful old building, a former Nazi Party headquarters. Meanwhile, Caroline had been living out of her suitcase, sleeping on a cot, and driving from town to town alone in a military jeep trying to “borrow” or order supplies: furniture, coal, fabric for curtains, kitchen sinks, light bulbs, paint, cleaning supplies, a radio, records, a record player, magazines, newspapers, books.
She was continually “on duty.” She worked most days from nine or ten in the morning until midnight or later. In Giessen, Caroline was the club’s Program Director and, with little help, organized and ran nearly all activities associated with the club, including ski trips, horseback riding, crafts, discussion groups, lectures, German classes, and bingo. If an orchestra were to play at the club, as one did four or five nights out of the week, it was up to Caroline to locate musicians, see that they were properly paid, and drive alone, often through dense fog over bombed out dirt roads, sometimes in an open jeep or a 2 ½ ton truck, to pick up and drop off each musician and his instrument in various villages in the countryside. The trip could take hours.

She had little free time to herself, but if she did get a precious evening off, she often spent it on a date to the movies or a U.S.O. show with an officer or G.I., though she didn’t have any real interest in the men. After one of her dates, just before Christmas 1945, she wrote to her mother: “I had fun because the music was good and I love to dance and it did me a lot of good to get away from the club and its atmosphere. But I have yet to find an interesting person in this area! I have a lot of G.I. friends, but there is no one with whom I have anything special in common or from whom I can get any sort of intellectual stimulus.” Dates came to be more of a chore than much fun; Caroline would have preferred time to herself to read and catch up on writing letters. But she went, perhaps, because she felt it was all a part of her job: to boost morale, to make the boys’ lives better. As one of only three white American girls in Giessen, she was very popular.

After Christmas, “the mid-winter slump” settled upon the club, and Caroline wrote increasingly of her hopes to be transferred in the spring – to somewhere like
Vienna or Bavaria, somewhere with some culture left, somewhere unlike Giessen. She repeatedly wrote of how anxious she was to get home and see the family but, she always added, as long as she was overseas, she might as well see as much of Europe as she possibly could, and add to her already varied experiences. For the time being, she really couldn’t wait for a break: her twelve-day leave, with eight days in Switzerland, coming up in February. And yet, Giessen was getting better day by day. A week before heading off to Switzerland, Caroline wrote her mother, “I have been having a lot more fun socially, and on the whole I’ve been very happy,” a sharp contrast to the tone of most previous letters and a hint, it seemed, that she had finally found someone who held her interest.

Oh, how I wish I were able to tell you what an absolutely perfect trip to Switzerland I had! It was the most wonderful and the happiest time I’ve ever had in my life – like a perfect dream come true. I hadn’t thought it was possible to enjoy myself so much.

The trip began with a “lucky” jeep ride with Lt. Frank Zigman to Mulhouse, France, where 5,000 troops a week were processed for leaves in Switzerland. (His name in future letters would be corrected to Frank Zigmund.) The two of them “as it turned out” would be taking the same tour. Caroline was the only young woman in her group of thirty-two, and she appreciated having Frank, someone she had known for a while in Giessen, to accompany her. There were thirteen tours to choose from, and Frank and Caroline chose tour 10 – to Arosa, a small resort town in the
mountains, known by the soldiers for its excellent winter sports. They were desperate to ski.

First, though, the pair stopped in Lucerne for tea and cognac, their favorite drink, and Caroline delighted in watching “healthy, well-dressed people relax and enjoy themselves in a leisurely, casual way,” something she surely never saw in Giessen. Finally they made their way to Arosa, where they took a sleigh ride from the train station to their hotel along the one main street in town. When they woke the next morning, they immediately outfitted themselves in ski equipment and headed for the newly installed lifts. From the slopes, they could ski right down into the main street and to their hotel’s front door. It was a magical trip. “Every day passed in unexcelled happiness,” due in part, no doubt, to Caroline and Frank’s budding romance, though she carefully hid that fact in her letters home. Rather, she wrote her mother that Frank was “a swell person” and “a very good friend,” but nothing more. And yet, on their last day in Switzerland, eager to spend their last few francs, the pair exchanged gifts: she gave him a Swiss lighter, and Frank gave her charms for her bracelet. It had been a “wonderful, perfect vacation” and they both hated to leave.

In a letter two months later, to a friend, Caroline wrote: “This winter – I’ve met a lieutenant, Frank Zigmund, former G.I. in Oran, Algeria for 2 ½ years. Have sort of lost my heart to him.” But to her mother, just weeks after her confession to her friend, she wrote:

For your general interest, I have no romantic inclinations toward anyone and unless things change, I’ll come home quite fancy free and happy and not upset
over any love affair! I mention this because I was a little concerned in your last letter when you made some mention of Lt. Zigmund. In thinking over what I’ve written you, it’s possible that I may have given you reason to think I was personally interested in him. I assure you most emphatically that that is not so. Of all the men I’ve known overseas, I thought he one of the nicest – mainly because we had such a pleasant, platonic relationship. If I didn’t make this straight before, I hope it is now. We’ve had misunderstandings before, so I want to be especially careful that we don’t have another.

Frank was married, and he and Caroline were having an affair. He felt like a stranger to his wife, after years overseas in the Middle East and Europe, and Caroline sympathized. She “tried to help him out.” She wrote to her mother about Frank’s
marriage troubles and assured her that she had told Frank to patch things up, to do his very best at making things work. But Frank was set on divorce – at least that’s what he told Caroline. In Arosa, they had grown especially close. When she wrote to her mother that she had no romantic inclinations and that there was no reason to worry that she would come home lovesick, Caroline was already two months pregnant.
In the spring of 1946, Caroline was thinking about leaving the Red Cross. She had worked as Staff Assistant and Program Director in clubs in Italy and Germany for eighteen months, and now, almost a year after the war in Europe had ended, the work was getting dull. The Army had begun to take over all recreation facilities, and the Red Cross was shipping girls home as quickly as possible. Caroline could have stayed with the Red Cross and been transferred somewhere better than Giessen if she wished. She had gained many friends in the Red Cross and in the Army willing to recommend her for her excellent service. But she had other things in mind: traveling Europe, gathering varied work experience, learning more about Germany and the war and herself. She didn’t really know what she wanted to do – not overseas or at home. She wanted to keep learning, to stay in Europe if she could, to see the world; she wanted to do something worthwhile, important, and interesting. Organizing club programs for the Red Cross was no longer a challenge, and she felt she could be more helpful in a different position.

Caroline was offered a job in France with Anne Morgan’s reincarnation of World War One’s American Committee for Devastated France – now, American Friends of France – but turned it down, despite the significant salary, because she thought she’d be lonely as the only American in a small French village. Instead, she
took a job, starting March 14, 1946, as an administrative assistant for the G-2 Division at the U.S. Forces, European Theater [USFET] headquarters in Frankfurt at a salary of $3,400 per year. She signed on for six months. An old R.C. friend, Ellen, had accepted a position there a few weeks earlier, and the two would start work together: the first civilian women to be hired in the G-2 Division.

After her first week, Caroline wrote home describing her new job: “I read cables, send cables, letters, internal route slips (actually inter-office memos – but they’re complicated in this vast army set-up), write staff studies, make news reports to the general, read much of the intelligence material that comes to [the Intelligence Branch] and send it along to respective offices, supervise the enlisted personnel in regard to their work efficiency, promotions, duties, leaves etc. And – in general – I’m supposed to do all the odd jobs of the Branch that don’t seem to fit into any special category – and assist Colonel Greene in any way that I can.” She hoped her family would approve of her decision to stay overseas, and to leave the Red Cross – she hadn’t heard from them in weeks. They hadn’t responded to her letter about Switzerland, which she had sent over a month earlier, or to her letters about her indecision over jobs, and whether she would live in France or Germany, work for the Army or for a civilian relief organization. She wanted her mother’s support and approval – she wanted her family to know that she had finally made up her mind. But the mail was excruciatingly slow, often sent to four or five different places before being properly routed.

Meanwhile, however, Caroline was enjoying her light schedule. Now, finally, she had her nights completely to herself. Frank Zigmund drove down to bring her
some things she had left in Giessen (or so she told her mother) and she took a weekend trip to Giessen to “visit the girls” and to let Frank drive her to Battenberg, where he was stationed as company commander of a black transport group. “It’s beautiful, wooded country – full of deer. We hope to go riding. After dinner – he’ll drive me back to Frankfurt. It’ll be nice to get out of Frankfurt for the weekend,” she wrote home. She didn’t want her mother to think she wasn’t having any fun, but she was careful not to suggest that she and Frank were anything more than friends. And she didn’t know yet that she was pregnant.

Mail from home finally started coming through – some of it had been sitting in Giessen for at least a week before being forwarded. Caroline’s mother was “so understanding” of her decision to continue working overseas, to leave the Red Cross, and to take a civilian job, and that greatly eased Caroline’s mind. But just as soon as her mother had received all the details of her new position, Caroline was wrangling for something else. “I’m trying to get out of the executive end of my job, because it entails so little responsibility,” she wrote. “To do so, I’m trying to prove my worth in evaluating news summaries etc, and writing articles and news summaries for our weekly bulletin. In a week or so, I’m going to force the issue and see what happens.”

Caroline wrote reports on the Soviet occupation of Hungary, and on the economic, political, and military environment in Albania, Poland, and Greece. Most of the material available to her was “secret” and she couldn’t quote it in her reports; she’d have to find other sources. “College themes were nothing compared to this!” she wrote to her mother, but she finally felt appropriately challenged, and she was
glad to learn so much more about the war. “[E]ach country fits into the picture like a jigsaw puzzle – parallels can be drawn in so many cases – just different places and names. At least, when I finish this job, I’ll read the paper with 100% more intelligence,” Caroline wrote home. Her superiors were impressed and congratulated Caroline on her writing skills; she was asked to write articles and summarize reports more and more. She was also invited, along with Ellen, to attend and cover certain sessions of the Paris Peace Conference (she and Ellen were the only civilian women in attendance), and to help interview and screen people coming out of concentration camps to “make sure they were who they said they were.” Before Caroline knew it, it was April, and then May. “The time is really flying by,” she reported, after describing evenings and weekends full of parties, tennis lessons, French class, church services – even the wedding of an old R.C. friend and a colonel. Summer was fast approaching and Caroline’s spirits were high.

Eventually, though, Caroline realized she was pregnant, probably in June or July of 1946. She would have had an operation if she could have, she tells me today, but it was too late. There was a period of panic: she couldn’t tell her mother, not after she had written home so emphatically not to worry about her romantic life, and there were few American women overseas to whom she could turn – almost all of her close R.C. friends had already gone home. One night, Dot Levy, the Club Director of The Cup and Saucer in Giessen during Caroline’s time there, was visiting Frankfurt and the two met for dinner. Desperate, Caroline told her everything, hoping that Dot, an older, experienced Red Cross worker, might have some advice. Though dating
overseas was technically allowed, premarital sex was taboo, something the Army, the
Red Cross, and American civilians back home often chose to ignore, despite the
“evidence” (namely, VD and babies born out of wedlock). There were rumors,
though, of pregnant, unmarried Red Cross girls quietly being sent home or
arrangements being made for their babies at European adoption or general “relief”
organizations. Dot Levy, Caroline thought, might know something about all that.

Dot immediately agreed to help Caroline. Her family knew a French family
who lived outside of Paris; the grandmother of the family, a Catholic woman, had lost
her Jewish husband during the war (he had been a doctor, and had died of a heart
attack). She would appreciate a young woman around the house – and especially the
extra rations Caroline would bring in. Dot also arranged for Caroline to volunteer for
Anne Morgan’s American Friends of France. Caroline had recently passed up a paid position with the Friends because she thought she would be lonely in rural France. Now, however, she had no choice. She retired from her position with the Army and left for Saint-Leu-la-Forêt in June. She commuted to Paris (then, an hour by train each way) to volunteer until she no longer could, around October. She was the only American living in the small French village, and no one spoke a word of English, least of all her new landlady.

Caroline lived with Madame Oppenot until a month or so before the baby was due; then, she moved into Paris. During this time she faked all her letters home, never
mentioning her pregnancy or the details of her living arrangements. (Caroline later destroyed all the letters she wrote home from France, though she now wishes she hadn’t – it leaves a gap in her personal history that her memory can’t quite fill in anymore.) She was lonely, but still felt lucky that she could keep her secret, and handle her “plight” without help from home.

Caroline gave birth to a blonde baby girl on December 11, 1946 at the American Hospital in Paris. She named the child Suzette. By February, she was long overdue back home and she couldn’t make up any more excuses. She flew from Paris to New York in a huge military cargo plane. She sat in the freezing hull, strapped to the wall with crossing shoulder straps, facing another row of passengers: all military men heading home. She was the only woman, and she was quite a sight with her tiny baby bundled up in her lap. The plane had to stop in Newfoundland for fuel – it was too heavy to make the trip home nonstop – and they landed during a blizzard. Flying conditions were so bad that everyone on the plane had to wait out the storm in a heated Nissen hut on the tarmac for at least two days. Then they flew on to New York, where Dot Levy met Caroline and her baby.
Grand Rapids was what my grandmother calls “a small town” when she was growing up there and when she returned after the war in February 1947. She was a local hero, and the entire city seemed proud of her. She had a full schedule starting the day she arrived: long conversations with old friends from school, many of them now married with children; luncheons and teas with friends of her mother; dinners in her honor; memorial ceremonies and victory celebrations where she was asked to give speeches, to smile and wave, to recount her experiences, what she had learned. Everyone wanted to speak with her, to hear her story; she was surrounded.

But she kept one secret from everyone: Suzette. She had left the child in New York, at a kind of pre-adoption place, as my grandmother remembers it, called the Children’s Aid Society. Dot Levy had arranged everything. Frank was nowhere to be found, either home with his wife or already redeployed to the Middle East. Caroline would never see or hear from him again. Back in Grand Rapids, Caroline felt overwhelmingly guilty. The constant praise began to get to her, and she decided that she would have to tell her mother. Today, she can’t recall the details of that conversation, only the events that followed. Why hadn’t she told her before, her mother wanted to know, why had she kept her pregnancy from her? Caroline didn’t know; she had wanted to avoid the crushing feeling she now felt of having ashamed
her mother, who had always been so caring, and had worked so hard to raise good girls. She thought things with Frank might work out – maybe he would help her, provide somehow. She thought she might have been able to take care of things, and never have to tell anyone, to admit anything. “I never should have told her,” my grandmother says now.

She would have to return to New York – she would have to give the baby up, that much was clear. She simply could not keep her, couldn’t do that – be that – to her poor mother. “I could not disgrace my mother in these circumstances,” she remembers, “I just could not.” She felt completely alone, and began even to feel detached from Suzette. It began to feel almost like the child wasn’t her daughter.

Her mother had left – briefly – for Chicago. In desperation, she had sought Caroline’s older brother’s and his wife’s advice. What could be done? What options might they consider? Serrell’s wife, Du, offered to adopt the baby. They were married; Serrell had a good job; they were liberal and accepting. That idea, however, was impractical, impossible. Her mother decided against it, perhaps without even consulting Caroline. Hermie, then still away at Smith, wonders today why Caroline hadn’t kept the baby and claimed that her “fiancé” had died in the war. But Hermie wouldn’t learn about the baby for many, many years to come; at the time, she was “protected” from the scandalous news.

No, Caroline would give the baby up. It was decided. For several months, Caroline traveled back and forth between Grand Rapids and New York, before finally signing the adoption papers. Her mother consulted the family lawyers and made sure
everything was legally sound. Though her mother had discussed the situation with Caroline’s brother and sister-in-law, Caroline had not. She talked to no one, acknowledged nothing. After she returned from New York, Caroline never discussed the baby, the adoption, or her feelings with her mother again. The issue, in her mother’s eyes, had been resolved. “It was a dead issue,” my grandmother remembers.

Caroline had trouble sleeping for years. She developed a rash on her back and shoulders. She would forget Frank, and try to forget Suzette. She had no choice but to try to put her past behind her, and move on. She rewrote herself.
After finalizing Suzette’s adoption, Caroline was eager to leave Grand Rapids— and her mother— and start over. She was a completely new person, she felt, and couldn’t bear to stick around her small town, where the only thing expected of her was to wait for a husband. She craved culture, and a good job, and moved to Chicago to stay with Serrell, who worked for *Time*, and his wife, Du. Serrell, who had often teased Caroline about finding a husband overseas, introduced her to George Eckel, and the two immediately became close. George was a reporter for *The New York Times* and he covered the Midwest from the Chicago office. In Chicago, “all the press knew each other,” my grandmother remembers, and almost as soon as she had arrived, she was fully immersed in that world.

Georges was handsome, quiet and sensitive. He was brilliant, my grandmother remembers, and she was smitten. She told him about Suzette and about the months of losing sleep, the nights she still spent crying, the overwhelming sense of guilt and shame she couldn’t seem to shake. George was “very sympathetic [...] but that didn’t change anything” – she didn’t want to “burden” him with her emotional needs. Rather, she let him know what she was going through, and then tried not to mention it again.
Meanwhile, Caroline was searching for a job. She needed to support herself, and keep her mind on her future. For the summer of 1947, again through the Smith vocational office, she found a job as head of the girls’ junior division at Cheley Colorado Camps in breathtaking Estes Park, Colorado. There, she rode horses and hiked in the Rockies. She loved being active and loved spending time with the young women and girls who attended Cheley from all over the country. She hoped she could inspire them, help them “build character.” She remembered how much she had loved camp as a girl, how she had appreciated spending summers out of town. This summer at camp, the summer of 1947, was an especially important one for Caroline. She slowly began to rebuild her own character, and her self-confidence.

In 2000, I went to Cheley. Grandma Caroline paid. I can imagine her now (though I couldn’t then) riding horses, feeling free and like herself. The outdoor chapel shared by the still-separate girls’ and boys’ camps looks out over the property and up to the Mummy Range of the Colorado Rockies, a truly awesome view. Caroline’s surroundings must have helped her feel whole again, and would have reminded her of New Mexico and her cherished memories of the Lees and ranch life.

George visited Caroline at Cheley, and proposed. They were married the next fall, in 1948, and they found an apartment in Chicago. George was 36, a bachelor, and Caroline was a month shy of 28. The two were “old enough to appreciate each other and very much in love,” my grandmother remembers. Everyone “adored George” – especially Mother. Caroline had found “the landmark of [her] life,” her perfect match, and the past began to fade.
While on vacation in the Northeast, after three years of blissful marriage, George told Caroline he felt a lump on the back of his head, and complained of a migraine. They decided to visit a doctor – to be safe – and the doctor told Caroline that George had developed an inoperable brain tumor, and that he would live three months, if lucky. Those three months must have been harder than anything Caroline had dealt with yet. She couldn’t tell George the details of his disease – that simply was not done. Rather, the duty fell to her to inform his relatives and to try to keep the details from George for as long as possible. He must have known he was dying, but Caroline stayed as positive as she could right up until the end. George died in November 1951. Caroline was heartbroken, destroyed.

“To this day I weep over his loss,” my grandmother has told me and no one else.

Serrell and his and George’s friends helped Caroline find a job with *Life* magazine in New York. She knew she’d stagnate in Grand Rapids, and returning to life in Chicago was simply too painful a thought to imagine. So off she went to start over once again; this time, alone.

After George’s death, Caroline put all her energy into her career: first at *Life*, then at *American Heritage*. She worked as Assistant Editor at *Life* and as Editorial Assistant and then Librarian and Chief of the Photographic Collection at *American*
Heritage. Though she had no professional experience in journalism or academic research, she reached out to the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art for guidance. “Never saw anybody work so hard in my life,” Hermie remembers. This is how Caroline’s lifelong career as an archivist and art librarian began.

Caroline met Ralph Backlund, my grandfather, through mutual publishing contacts. They married in May 1956. When Caroline was 41, in January 1962, my dad Nicholas was born. A few years later – years she spent raising Nicholas and working full time – Caroline attended Columbia University School of Library Service and received her MLS in June 1966.

Ralph always reminded Caroline of George: he was brilliant, intellectual, sensitive and charming. For years, she called him George.

In the fall of 1966, Ralph was offered a political appointment as Cultural Affairs Officer in the State Department and the young family relocated to Washington, DC. In Washington, Caroline volunteered for various Georgetown groups while she looked for a job and was also asked to serve on the founding board of the new National Museum of Women in the Arts. When Richard Nixon was elected President, Ralph lost his job with the State Department, and he was happy to go. He was then asked to co-found Smithsonian magazine, where he worked until he retired.
Caroline told Ralph about Suzette, and she had told George, but she hadn’t mentioned her first child to anyone else since telling her mother in 1947. Only her brother Serrell and his wife Du knew of the baby (through Dorothy, not Caroline), and they had kept her secret. Caroline’s other siblings, her relatives, and her friends were never told about Suzette, had no idea. For over thirty years, Caroline dealt with her grief and guilt completely alone. Two of her closest relationships – with George and with Ralph – were ultimately kept separate from her memories of Suzette, my grandmother recalls today. She kept them separate. She told me,

I married two very introspective, brilliant men who were basically rather quiet people. Now I always realized – at least I felt – that just because you get married doesn’t mean you have to swallow them up. I greatly respected their privacy. They were both older men when I married them – and had busy lives. I never questioned them about their personal lives and I also felt that they needed a lot of time to themselves. So I intentionally kind of – I thought I gave them a lot of room, emotional room. And I think, you know, I was a good wife. I really felt I was. […] Now, when you are really congenial you don’t have to– you understand these things without vocalizing them. It’s just the way you deal with people. And I think a woman has to realize there are a lot of things men just aren’t interested in.

In 1983, years after Mother died, Caroline received a telephone call from Suzette, now Susan, who was living in Australia with her two young girls. Susan, Caroline learned, was in Washington, DC, where she had grown up and where her
adoptive parents lived, for Christmas. She wanted to meet Caroline, and her adoptive parents supported her. Caroline had often wondered about Susan and wanted to know more about her: how she had been raised, what she was interested in, where she lived and what she did there. She invited Susan and her two daughters to a special Christmas party at her house. First, though, Caroline had to tell her own family that Susan existed, that she had a nearly 40-year-old daughter.

Caroline’s sister Hermione remembers being told: “I was well grown up, long past being grown up. I remember I was visiting Caroline and Ralph and they just sat me down one night and told me. And, I mean, I was totally flabbergasted.”

Hermie had had no idea that her older sister had given birth overseas and brought back a baby, that she had lied to her mother and her family, and that she had given the baby up – all without confiding in anyone but Mother. Hermie had been away at Smith when Caroline returned from France; she had been physically and emotionally removed from the entire ordeal. She was too surprised to ask many questions when Caroline first told her, and she hasn’t asked any since. Caroline and Hermie talk on the phone weekly and though they often speak of Susan, they have never discussed the adoption, or Frank, or what it was like for Caroline to tell their mother, or to give birth in Paris. They probably never will. “What is the point now?” Hermie asks me.

The December 1983 reunion was a happy one. Caroline tried to make peace with her past by telling her family about Susan, and by welcoming her into her home
and into her life. She met Susan’s adoptive parents, and was overjoyed to find that they were affluent, musical, well-educated people. Still, though, remembering was painful. In her first letter to Susan after they met, Caroline wrote,

> Our reunion opened wounds for me, as well, and these I am also trying to cope with. The emotions of all those years since your birth are welling up in me – feelings I have great difficulty dealing with. They involve not only the renewed sense of loss I feel in having given you up and all the years with you I missed that cannot ever be regained (feelings that are incredibly painful to me) but feelings of anger to my own Mother, particularly for the guilt she imposed on me – unconscious, I presume, but nevertheless very real – and for never, ever discussing with me your birth which she knew was so central to my entire life.

> With this letter, Caroline and Susan began many years of correspondence. Susan had been actively searching for her birth parents for years and finding Caroline changed her. She now felt she knew who she was; she felt an immediate connection with Caroline, an immediate bond, a deep love. Caroline also loved Susan, but finding her didn’t change what had happened in the years since her birth, and it certainly didn’t make dealing with Ralph’s illness or working full time as an art librarian at the National Gallery of Art any easier. Caroline’s reunion with Susan was not expected, and not necessarily wanted. Caroline was 63 years old; Susan was 37. Caroline had been pushed into adoption, pushed to move on, and she was now being pushed to remember it all again. She had rebuilt her life, her character, herself. This was an intrusion.
Caroline and Susan were pushed even closer together, however, in May 1984, about four months after the reunion. Mrs. Hayes, Susan’s adoptive mother, sent Caroline the following letter:

May 5, 1984

Dear Caroline,

We have been thinking about Susan and our responsibility towards her, lately. Partly this is because I have been working on my Mother’s estate, of which she has named me Executrix.

We always treated Susan as our own daughter, of course, giving her love, attention, foreign travel, an education and, we hope, a good system of values. We were happy that she and you were able to get together, at last, and we know she was thrilled about it.

We will always love Susan and we remember our family life with Susan and Jonathan [the Hayeses’ biological son] with great pleasure. It would not be candid, however, to say that our relationship with her has been unaffected by this recent development.

In addition to the love we felt – and still do – we also always felt a financial responsibility for Susan – not that she hasn’t been able to make a fulfilling life for herself on her own but, rather, that we stood ready to help her if she ever needed it. We also wanted to make her life a little easier by sharing some of our modest assets with her, particularly the assets I have received from my Father’s and Mother’s estates. Last year, for example, in addition to providing airplane tickets for Susan and family, I passed on to her some $14,000 from a trust established by my Father. This year, I plan to send her some bonds from my Mother’s estate.
On the other hand, we no longer feel that we are the only ones to whom Susan should feel she can turn for help if she needs it – and the arrival of a third child may well have some budgetary implications. Moreover, it does not seem reasonable that she should expect the same share of my Mother’s estate – or of ours, eventually – as would have been the case if we had continued to be the only parents who felt responsible for her. Presumably, she can now look to you for financial help, if she needs it.

We hope that you share our perception of the situation. In the interest of full understanding all around, I am sending Susan a copy of this letter.

Please give our greetings to Ralph.

With best wishes,

A.M.

Caroline was mortified. She and Susan discussed the letter, and agreed it was unnecessary, cruel, and bizarre. They both sent hurt, heartfelt replies. Caroline’s relationship with the Hayes, as well as Susan’s, cooled. For years Caroline helped Susan and her daughters financially. She sent cards, gifts, tuition; she remembered every birthday, and always sent things for Christmas. But Susan’s girls have never sent thank you cards. Susan went to graduate school, then quit. Her youngest daughter attended a good private school, but didn’t like it, quit. Susan and the girls, it seems to Caroline, have never fully appreciated the sacrifices she made (and continues to make) to support them and to be a part of their lives. They didn’t appreciate the value of hard work, of perseverance; they didn’t seem to value education.
Today, Susan is a licensed masseuse. The girls completed high school, but never made it to college. They work, and live with roommates or a boyfriend. Ika, the oldest, just had a baby with a married man. He told her he and his wife were separated. He and Ika recently broke up; he left.

Susan and the girls weren’t like her, Caroline decided. They were different. Now she feels a new guilt.
When I was six or seven years old my parents drove my brother and me from our home in San Diego to Disneyland, about two hours away, in Anaheim. We’d been before, but this trip would be different: we would stay in a hotel, overnight, which meant we could maximize our time in the park and ride all the good stuff. We didn’t have a lot of money and we never would have stayed in a hotel two hours from home – but this was a special occasion. Sam and I packed and repacked our bags for days; we couldn’t wait. Grandma Caroline was paying for our rooms and the tickets, but she wasn’t going to come. The point, she said, was for us to meet Susan. She was going to fly Susan and her three daughters from Australia to Anaheim so they could hang out with us at Disneyland, and stay across the hall from us at a hotel across the street from Disneyland. We could sit by the hotel pool with them, get to know them.

If I had met my Aunt Susan or my cousins before, I had been too young to remember. I don’t think I did, and no one can seem to remember with any certainty. My dad knew her, but not very well because she lived in Australia. Susan’s youngest daughter, Josie, was just a year or two older than me. We got along pretty well. It was a fun trip, and I mostly remember the pool and a few photographs taken there of me and Josie and her sisters. I never met Susan or the girls after that, except maybe once, the next year. I never wrote to them or talked to them on the phone. Over time, I
forgot the details of their faces and their accents and started to confuse the names of the two older sisters, Ika and Amelia. I only had the photographs; they became my memory. I missed Josie, and then I forgot her.

I knew that my grandmother had been married before she met my grandfather and had my dad, who had grown up as an only child. I assumed Susan was from that marriage. Then one of my parents told me that Grandma had put Susan up for adoption and something about life in those days, a different time. One of my parents also told me that Grandma had regretted giving Susan up since the minute she signed the papers, and that she spent decades searching for her. I wonder, now, who rewrote that part of the story.

My grandmother didn’t come with us to Disneyland. I think she wanted to do something nice for Susan without actually having to see her. I think it was strange for her and painful. I eventually learned, in pieces, Susan’s history as told by my mother and my father, by my grandmother and her sister. Susan had always been a secret – a forced and necessary secret – and my grandmother kept that secret from my father for many years, just as she kept it from Hermie and her closest friends. My dad was first told about Susan when he was in college in France, dating my mother, just after Susan and my grandmother had made contact through the Children’s Aid Society.

My grandmother had kept the existence of his half-sister from my dad for over twenty years. I imagined him in a room in France with my mom and with his parents celebrating the end of the school year. I imagined my grandmother telling him about Susan. I thought about the different ways she might have told him, how she may have
prepared him for the shock. I imagined my dad yelling at her in that voice I knew so well, that loud, exacerbated whine that only surfaced over the phone with his mother. I could see my own mom listening and watching and thinking they were all crazy. I imagined her with my dad that night, drinking.

It wasn’t until my mom – it must have been my mom – told me how and when my dad learned he had a sister that I started to see my grandmother differently. The details of her story – what she was doing in the Red Cross, the life she had before she met my grandfather – didn’t interest me yet. I was captivated by the simple fact: she didn’t tell my dad about Susan until he was in college. What was she thinking? Why would she do that? How did she get to be a short, round old lady who attends weekly water aerobics classes and speaks in that old-fashioned, high-pitched voice (Niiicholassss!), who nods off during dinner and falls asleep on the sofa reading The New Yorker? Who is she?
Illustrations

1. Dorothy and the children (l-r: Dougie, Dorothy, Caroline, Hermie, Serrell); c. 1928-32 [page 9]
2. Caroline and her father playing in the surf at Lake Michigan; c. 1920s [page 13]
3. Caroline riding “Red Devil” and wearing her Levi’s denim jacket; c. 1942-1944 [page 17]
4. “The only street of Grants!” (caption from Caroline’s New Mexico scrapbook); c. 1942-4 [page 23]
5. Caroline’s official Red Cross portrait; c. 1944 [page 28]
6. One of Caroline’s letters home, censored by the U.S. Army Examiner; c. October 1944 [page 32]
7. Foggia, Italy; c. 1944 [page 33]
8. Enlisted men playing chess at the beach club in Manfredonia; c. summer 1945 [page 41]
9. Caroline and a friend at the beach club holding up an issue of The Stars and Stripes with the headline “PEACE AT LAST”; c. August 1945 [page 41]
10. Frank and Caroline, seated on the right, on leave in Arosa; c. February 1946 [page 50]
11. Caroline in Paris, pregnant (cut from an old scrapbook); c. August 1946 [page 56]
12. Madame Oppenot; summer or fall 1946 [page 57]
Afterword

This project – in all ways – would not be possible without my grandmother, Caroline H. Backlund. Though some in our family have been invited to look at select photographs or documents on occasion or have specifically asked her for help with genealogy projects, she has never made the full extent of her archives available to anyone. I have had more access than most, but I have not read or seen everything. There are thousands upon thousands of papers and photographs and cards and clippings; they are stored or stuffed away in closets, in filing cabinets, under her bed. But her archives also include objects: her denim jacket from New Mexico, souvenirs from her travels, two childhood diaries, a dress of Mother’s, photo albums, scrapbooks, and her wedding rings – she still wears them both.

For this project, I have read many letters – both from and to Caroline. Most of these have been from Caroline to her mother, during her Red Cross years. They are written or typewritten on different sizes of dangerously thin Red Cross stationary or they are written or typewritten on more expensive, heavier personal stationary, either in a white or cream or light blue color. Some handwritten letters are in ink, others in pencil. The photographs in her collection also range in size and shape and color. Many are professional portraits, stamped on the back with the address of the studio; some are family snapshots; others were taken by Red Cross photographers or by soldiers or friends and passed on to her. All letters, photographs, and clippings have
been Xeroxed; Caroline keeps the original and the Xerox, paperclipped together if possible. To my horror, when I asked her to locate some letters for me, she began Xeroxing them (though, by her own rule, copies already existed – somewhere) and throwing out the originals. I managed to rescue what I could, though it is possible that some things have been lost. A future project, which I have happily claimed as my own, will be to organize and catalogue her letters, and label and date as many photographs as possible.

I am immensely grateful to my grandmother for sharing her archives with me and for speaking with me openly and honestly on many occasions. This project would simply not exist if my grandmother had not shared long-buried secrets with me – even Hermie, for example, still does not know anything about Frank, not even his name. I know it was difficult and, at times, painful for my grandmother to remember certain things and to help me (and perhaps herself, too) reconstruct her past in a way that has never really been public before.

I am also grateful to Hermione Wickenden, Caroline’s sister, who also spoke openly with me about Caroline. My parents, too, have shared their stories with me, as have Hermione’s children, David and Dorothy Wickenden, and David’s wife, Cynthia Snyder.

My grandmother has given me permission to write her life as I choose, and she has allowed me open access to her archives. However, there are some things, I suspect, she may have intentionally or subconsciously kept from me. She was very reluctant to hand over her childhood diaries, for example, and insisted she reread
everything she gave me, all while assuring me she wouldn’t dream of self-censoring. She sometimes contradicts herself and/or her memories, and she often confuses dates and names. I have done my best to be accurate to the facts, but also to the more complicated truth. The facts alone – the physical, historical documents – provide a fascinating biography; but my grandmother’s memories, her understanding of herself and her past, her public and private emotions, and my understanding of her and her memories also tell a story, a story I hesitate to call biography.
Note on Sources

As mentioned, I relied heavily on Caroline H. Backlund’s personal archives for this project, notably, many of her letters home during her two and a half years overseas during and after World War Two and her childhood diaries. The letters Caroline sent home from 1944-1946 are accompanied in her archives by clippings from *The Stars and Stripes* as well as from Red Cross publications, photographs taken by friends and official Red Cross photographers, a personal scrapbook, clippings from Grand Rapids newspapers, a sketch of her room in Foggia, and a few remaining letters her mother sent her. Her childhood diaries are also supplemented, in her archives, by many photographs and photo albums, various clippings, and letters and Xeroxes of letters from her father, for example, and from other relatives. A large box exists full of material about her father (listed in Chapter 2), which her mother had collected after his death and passed on to Caroline. Scrapbooks and loose photographs provide background on her time in New Mexico, as well as her time at Smith College. Some events had to be reconstructed almost entirely from my grandmother’s memory. When I spoke with Hermione, Caroline’s sister, I saw that even seemingly significant details can be forgotten – or suppressed. For example, Hermione remembers Caroline telling her in the 1980s that Frank met her and baby Suzette at the airport in New York. Caroline refutes this. Both question and fault the other’s memory.
I conducted, recorded, and transcribed a series of interviews with my grandmother:

July 21, 2010 – Washington, DC
July 24, 2010 – Washington, DC
July 27, 2010 – Washington, DC
July 31, 2010 – Washington, DC
August 6, 2010 – Washington, DC
August 9, 2010 – Washington, DC
August 15, 2010 – Washington, DC
August 16, 2010 – Washington, DC
August 22, 2010 – Washington, DC

I also relied heavily on my grandmother to answer questions over the phone and to send on more material as I realized I wanted it, or as she was able to locate it. We spoke informally, at least weekly, throughout the 2010-2011 school year.

I also conducted, recorded, and transcribed an interview with Hermione Wickenden (by telephone) on March 25, 2011. I also informally spoke and/or corresponded with my parents, Amy and Nicholas Backlund, and with David Wickenden (Hermie’s son) and Cynthia Snyder (David’s wife), among other relatives.

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I found a number of books very helpful – for various instructional, educational, and/or inspirational reasons – during my research and my writing, including:


Chronology

December 19, 1920
Caroline Hillman is born to Dorothy and Lemuel Hillman in Grand Rapids, Michigan

February 21, 1930
Caroline’s father, Lemuel Hillman, is hit by a car and killed

June 1938
Caroline graduates Central High School, Grand Rapids on the honor roll

fall 1938 – spring 1942
Caroline attends Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts

September 1942 – summer 1943
Caroline tutors Bito and Bita in San Mateo, New Mexico

fall 1943 – summer 1944
Caroline teaches English at the Brownmoor School in Santa Fe, New Mexico

summer 1944
Caroline applies to the Red Cross, and works at the Bissell Carpet Sweeper factory preparing military de-icers for planes

August 1944
Caroline attends Red Cross orientation in Washington, DC

September 1944
Caroline leaves Virginia by ship

October 1944 – May 1945
Caroline works at the ARC club for enlisted men in Foggia, Italy
May 1945 – September 1945
Caroline works at the ARC beach club for enlisted men in Manfredonia, Italy

September 1945
Caroline awaits reassignment at ARC headquarters in Paris, France

October 1945 – March 1946
Caroline helps establish and works at the ARC club for enlisted men in Allied-occupied Giessen, Germany

March 1946
Caroline resigns from the ARC and begins work as a civilian administrative assistant for the G-2 Division at the U.S. Forces, European Theater headquarters in Frankfurt, Germany; she has a civilian/military rank of 1st lieutenant

spring 1946
Caroline realizes she is pregnant, resigns from her position with the Army, and reaches out to Dot Levy for advice and support

summer 1946
Caroline moves to Saint-Leu-la-Forêt, France and stays with Ms. Levy’s family friend, Mme. Oppenot; she volunteers in Paris for Anne Morgan’s French civilian relief organization, American Friends of France

December 11, 1946
Caroline gives birth to Suzette (now Susan) in Paris, France

February 1947
Caroline travels home to Grand Rapids via Newfoundland and New York, where she and Ms. Levy have arranged for Suzette to stay at the Children’s Aid Society

spring 1947
Caroline tells her mother about Suzette and they agree to finalize the adoption; Caroline moves to Chicago where her older brother Serrell introduces her to George Eckel

summer 1947
Caroline works at Cheley Colorado Camps in Estes Park, Colorado; George proposes
October 11, 1948
Caroline Hillman and George Eckel marry in Grand Rapids

1948-1951
Caroline and George live in Chicago

November 1951
George dies of a brain tumor

1952
Caroline moves to New York City and begins working as Assistant Editor for *Life* magazine

May 18, 1955
Caroline Eckel and Ralph Backlund marry in New York City

1955 - 1965
Caroline works as Editorial Assistant for *American Heritage* magazine; she is soon promoted to Librarian and Chief of the Photographic Collection; she reaches out to men and women at the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art for professional help

January 17, 1962
Nicholas Sheppard Backlund, Caroline and Ralph’s only child, is born in New York City

June 1966
Caroline receives her MLS from Columbia University School of Library Service

summer 1966
Caroline and Ralph travel to Turkey and Greece for four weeks

fall 1966
Ralph is offered and accepts a political appointment as Cultural Affairs Officer in the U.S. State Department; the Backlunds move to Washington, DC

1966 - 1968
Caroline volunteers for various Georgetown clubs and charities, serves on founding board of the new National Museum of Women in the Arts
January 1969
Ralph leaves the State Department and helps co-found *Smithsonian* magazine, where he works until he retires

1969
Caroline lands an Assistant Librarian position at Harvard’s Byzantine Research Library, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC; Caroline’s lifelong interest in the Middle East begins

1971
Caroline travels to eastern Anatolia, Turkey on a trip sponsored by the Byzantine Research Library, Dumbarton Oaks

1972 – 1996
Caroline works at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, first as a Reference Librarian, then as Head of Reader Services, and finally as Librarian for Collection Development; at the Gallery, Caroline publishes, lectures, and teaches, often organizing material for visiting graduate classes; Caroline and Ralph sponsor many foreign doctoral students in an extra third floor bedroom in their Mass. Ave. home

1974
Caroline and Ralph travel to Tuscany and Venice, Italy

1978
Caroline travels alone to Afghanistan and Iran, where she meets a friend from her *American Heritage* days, Douglas Tunstell; while en route to Iran, the pilot announces that the Iranian revolution has begun

May 16, 1979
Caroline’s mother, Dorothy Woodruff Hillman, dies

1980 – 1982
Nicholas attends University of Vermont

December 1983
Susan contacts Caroline through the Children’s Aid Society in New York; Caroline hosts a reunion at her home and meets Susan and her children for the first time
1982 - 1986
Nicholas attends the American College in Paris (now, the American University in Paris); there, he meets my mother, Amy Knoblauch

May 1984
The Hayes send Caroline (and Susan) a letter relieving themselves of future financial responsibility to Susan; Caroline and Susan begin years of frequent correspondence

Late spring 1984
Caroline tells Nicholas about Susan during a trip – with Ralph – to Paris and Burgundy, France

1988
Caroline teaches a course in art librarianship at the University of New South Wales, Australia; she visits Susan and her family

November 30, 1988
Caroline’s granddaughter Anya Knoblauch is born in Paris, France; her parents are not married; when Amy applies for an American passport for Anya, she changes her name to Backlund

1989
Nicholas Backlund and Amy Knoblauch marry in New York City

1989
Caroline is the third ever recipient of the Art Libraries Society of North America’s (ARLIS-NA) Distinguished Service Award

May 14, 1991
Caroline’s older brother Serrell dies in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Caroline had often driven alone from Washington to visit him during the last few years of his life

October 7, 1991
Caroline’s grandson, Samuel Backlund, is born in Cold Springs, New York

1992
Caroline travels to Lisbon, Portugal to visit her friend Douglas Tunstell, who is dying of cancer; the trip is brief and painful
1993
Caroline travels to Sweden and Norway for an international conference on art librarianship

April 11, 1994
Ralph Backlund dies in Washington, DC; the family gathers in Washington

1995
Caroline travels with a group from the Textile Museum in Washington, DC to Morocco

1996
Caroline travels, again with a group from the Textile Museum, to western Turkey

1998
Caroline travels with friend Stephen Dennis to St. Petersburg and Novgorod, Russia

1999
Caroline travels with Christ Church Georgetown to Israel and Jordan

2001
Caroline travels to Cyprus, Greece with a group from the Textile Museum

2002
Caroline travels to Tunisia, again on a trip sponsored by the Textile Museum

2006
Caroline takes a trip with other Smith College alumnae to Tuscany, Italy

February 1, 2007
Caroline’s younger brother Douglas dies

2009
Caroline visits Nicholas in Paris, France, where he moved in 2008

December 22, 2010
Caroline celebrates her 90th birthday (December 19) with her family in Washington, DC
Acknowledgements

Infinite thanks to Professors Lisa Cohen and Sean McCann, my advisors for the Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 semesters, respectively. I’ve been extremely lucky to work with such kind, talented and careful advisors; I will miss them both.

Many thanks also to my grandmother, Caroline H. Backlund, an amazing woman and subject and a very gracious storyteller/sharer; my parents, Amy and Nick Backlund; Hermione Wickenden; Susan Vasey; Cynthia Snyder and David Wickenden for providing a home base for my research in Washington, DC during the summer of 2010; Professor Claire Potter; Dorothy Wickenden, whose book about her own grandmother, Caroline’s mother, Dorothy Woodruff Hillman, Nothing Daunted (Scribner 2011), will be released this June; Mary Weir, Ross Shenker, Robert Eastman, and Jonathan Spindel for reading and responding.